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ABSTRACT

The first stage of a 3-part research project designed to assess the appropriateness of using cooperative learning groups in communication courses with a significant oral performance component, a study assessed student perceptions about the appropriateness of using cooperative learning groups in a communication class with more than half of the final grade based on performance in oral performances. Students in five sections of the basic public speaking course taught by three instructors participated. Instructors for each section were given instructions about how to structure cooperative learning groups. A total of 49 useable surveys were collected at the end of the semester, a response rate of 81.6%. Results indicated that students (1) judged the cooperative learning methods used to be effective; (2) felt more prepared as a result of the required practice sessions structured into the cooperative learning group; (3) were actively involved in providing feedback to members of their learning group, and that overall the feedback was judged to be valuable; (4) found the cooperative learning groups to be useful in helping them control their public speaking anxiety; and (5) felt that their competence as communicators generally and public speakers specifically improved as a result of interaction in the cooperative learning groups. (Contains 26 references, 11 notes, and 6 tables of data.) (RS)

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Using Cooperative Learning Approaches in the Instructional Method of Performance-Based Communication Courses

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at

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> *"When students value both how they learn as well as what they learn, motivation has a unity which is more continuous and dynamic. Like a wonderful adventure, both the journey and the destination have much to offer"* (Wlodkowski, 1989:8).

Introduction

Wlodkowski's (1989) assertion suggests that educators should endeavor to help students value the process of learning as well as its intended benefits. According to Wlodkowski, students value the process when it enhances their ability to actively construct meaning from the information they integrate; they value the benefits of learning when the information they integrate (the learning outcomes) are meaningful and useful.

Cooperative learning (a.k.a. collaborative learning and peer learning) is a learning process which is designed to motivate students to acquire information and ideas, integrate the information they acquire in ways that make sense to them, and discover how to apply the information in meaningful and useful ways. As such, cooperative learning is arguably the type of learning process--or "journey"--to which educators, at least according to Wlodkowski, should subscribe.

Cooperative learning groups are structured around five key components: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, social skills, and group process (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991). In order for a cooperative learning group to have positive interdependence, the students in the group must depend in meaningful ways upon each other for success. A cooperative learning group has promotive

interaction when students in the group encourage each other and when they facilitate completion of each other's work. Promotive interaction is a critical component of a cooperative learning group. As Johnson, Johnson, and Smith write:

> "Promotive interaction is defined as individuals encouraging and facilitating each other's efforts to achieve, complete tasks, and produce to reach the group's goals. While positive interdependence in and of itself might have some effect on outcomes, it is the face-to-face promotive interaction among individuals, fostered by the positive interdependence, that most powerfully influences efforts to achieve, caring and committed relationships, and psychological adjustment and social competence." (1989, p.30)

Cooperative learning groups also must have individual accountability. This is to say, ultimately each member of the group must be responsible for completing her/his work and must be held accountable for the quality of that work. Students in cooperative learning groups must also possess the requisite social skills necessary to enable them to be effective group members. Students, for example, must be able to exercise leadership and posses the communication skills necessary to function productively. Finally, cooperative learning groups must include some form of group processing or assessment of how well they are working together. Students in a cooperative learning group must assess their role in the group as well as how the students in the group function as a unit. The group must then be given the opportunity to make modifications in the group process to improve the task, maintenance, and interpersonal outcomes of the group.

Research on Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is neither a recent development in education, nor an experimental learning process. The first formal studies about the effects of cooperation on learning were conducted in the 1800's, and since that time a significant amount of research has been conducted about cooperative learning.[1] Research suggests that using cooperative learning processes can enhance student learning in a number of ways.

At the most fundamental level, research suggests that using cooperative learning processes can enhance student achievement. Johnson and Johnson (1989), the most prolific proponents of cooperative learning processes, summarized over 375 studies conducted over the past 90 years about the comparative successfulness of competitive, individualistic, and cooperative efforts in promoting student achievement (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). According to their analysis, all students--average, high quality, and children/college/adult--demonstrated higher achievement levels when using cooperative learning processes than they did when using either individualistic or competitive ones. [2]

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[1] Johnson, Johnson, and Smith report that research on cooperative and competitive learning began in the 1800's and that between 1900 and 1991, over 675 studies about cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning involving a broad and diverse range of subjects has been reported.

[2] Johnson, Johnson, and Smith summarized their results as follows: "When all of the studies were included in the analysis, the average students cooperating performed at about two-thirds a standard deviation above the average student learning with a competitive (effect size=0.67) or individualistic (effect size=0.64) situation. When only high quality students were included in the analysis, the effect sizes were 0.88 and 0.61 respectively. When only college and adult studies were included in the analysis, the results were similar.

Slavin (1990, 1991) reached a similar conclusion in his assessment of cooperative learning and traditional instructional methods in elementary and secondary schools. Similarly in a synthesis of research on cooperative learning by Joyce, Showers, and Roheiser-Bennett (1987) concluded that on standardized achievement tests, cooperative learning groups performed above the 90th percentile of students in the control groups. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith provide a conceptual explanation of why cooperative learning process enhance student achievement when they write: "In cooperative situations, everyone benefits from the efforts of the cooperators. Because it is in each student's best interests to encourage the productivity of collaborators, the group's norms support efforts to achieve" (1991, p.34-35). Taken as a whole, these analyses warrant the conclusion that the effects of cooperative learning methods on student achievement are marked and consistent (Raffini, 1993).

In addition, cooperative learning has also been demonstrated to enhance the quality of student achievement. Cooperative learning promotes greater use of higher-level reasoning strategies and critical thinking than competitive or individualistic learning processes (Gabbert, Johnson, and Johnson 1986; Johnson and Johnson, 1981; Johnson, Skon, and Johnson, 1980; Skon, Johnson, and Johnson 1981; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991). Students using

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Cooperative learning promoted higher achievement than did competitive or individualistic learning (effect sizes=0.59 and 0.62 respectively). Interestingly, competition promoted higher achievement than did individualistic learning (effect size 0.67).

cooperative learning processes also generate new and creative ideas and solutions more frequently and demonstrate greater ability to apply information learned in the group process to individual situations (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991) than do students using individualistic or competitive learning processes.

Cooperative learning has also been shown to have a significant impact on the attitudinal and motivational levels of students (Raffini, 1993). Raffini draws the conclusions based on the research of Joyce, Showers, and Rolheiser-Bennett (1987), that cooperative learning processes can promote positive interpersonal environments among students by enhancing student empathy and positive feelings toward others, and by reducing anti-social behavior and tensions. Cooperative learning can also enhance student cooperation, favorable attitudes toward school (Slavin, 1983) attitudes toward the course's subject matter (Kulik and Kulik 1979), and satisfaction with the class (Light 1990). Finally, cooperative learning process can promote development of students' self-esteem by enhancing feelings of belonging, autonomy, and control (Slavin, 1983; McDaniel, 1984).

Cooperative Learning and Performance-based Communication Classes

Although there is considerable data to support the conclusion that cooperative learning processes are generally beneficial, there is little direct data to demonstrate the appropriateness of cooperative learning processes as an instructional method for

courses with a significant oral performance component. Most of the studies on cooperative learning have focused on the use of cooperative learning in situations involving traditional--and often written--assessment methods such as examinations, group problem solving and individually and collaboratively constructed papers. Few studies directly examine the potential effects of cooperative learning processes within the context of performance-based courses.[3]

This is an unfortunate omission because courses with a significant oral performance component are commonplace in speech communication curricula. Courses such as public speaking, advanced public speaking, and debate typically have significant oral performance components and are often included in many undergraduate programs. Other courses such as small group communication, persuasion, and public relations--again fairly typical courses in an undergraduate curriculum-- might also contain significant oral performance components.

Moreover, courses with a significant oral performance component are central to the broad educational mission of communication studies. The central instructional goals of our discipline are to help students become more effective communicators

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[3] Johnson and Johnson (1989) have compiled the most extensive review of research on cooperative learning. They cite few studies which deal with cooperative learning in courses with a significant oral performance component. One study they do cite (Neer, 1987), discusses using groups to help reduce communication apprehension. However, the focus of Neer's study is on developing and testing an instrument to assess communication apprehension rather than assessing the appropriateness of cooperative learning groups per se.

and to understand communication processes.[4] Courses with a significant oral performance component expose students to basic principles and relationships about communication processes, and provide students with the opportunity to develop and refine their skills as communicators. In addition, the oral performance course is the only course about communication studies some students--particularly non-majors will ever take. Because they are central to our educational mission, assessing the appropriateness of instructional methods used in courses with a significant oral performance component is important.

Focus of this Study

This study is the first stage in a three-part research project designed to assess the appropriateness of using cooperative learning groups in communication courses with a significant oral performance component. In this stage we will assess student perceptions about the appropriateness of using cooperative learning groups in a communication class with a significant oral performance component.[5] A student's perception about the instructional methods

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[4] We suggest these as generally recognized goals across the discipline. We do not intend to deny the legitimacy of any other educational goals, nor do we intend to imply that all Communication Studies programs subscribe to these general goals with the same degree of commitment.

[5] Stage two involves assessment of student performance outcomes generated through cooperative learning. In that stage, student speeches will be videotaped and scored by blind graders to determine the general quality of the students' performance. In stage three, we will compare student performance outcomes generated in cooperative vs traditional lecture-based formats.

used in a course can affect her motivation and performance. Thus, determining student perceptions is an important first step in assessing the overall appropriateness of cooperative learning groups.

Three specific questions will be addressed: (1) Overall will students judge cooperative learning groups to be an effective method of instruction in a communication course with a significant oral performance component?; (2) What strengths will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a significant oral performance component to have?; (3) What weaknesses will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a significant oral performance component to have?

Sample Selection and Structure

For the purpose of this study, "significant oral performance component" is operationally defined as any course in which 50% or more of the final course grade depends on assessment of one or more formal oral performance assignments. This criterion for "significant oral performance component" is reasonable because it ensures no other course component will have a greater effect on the final course grade than the oral performance assignments.

Although many Communication Studies programs offer different types of courses with a significant oral performance component, sections of an introductory public speaking courses were used in this study. This course was used because: (1) it contained an oral

performance component which clearly met the 50% criterion; (2) the content and oral performance assignments in basic public speaking courses tend to be fairly similar, thus enhancing the generalizeability of conclusions; and (3) public speaking courses are generally taken by both majors and non-majors, thus offering greater student diversity and the opportunity to draw broader conclusions about the appropriateness of instructional methods.[6]

Students in five sections of the basic public speaking course taught by three instructors participated in this study. Instructors for each section were given instructions about how to structure the cooperative learning groups for their respective classes. Positive interdependence was structured into the groups via a reward system in which each member of the group earned additional points if all group members met or exceeded established performance standards on assignments. Promotive interaction was infused into the group process through explanation of content material, critiques of homework assignments, and critiques of speeches. Individual accountability was maintained by grading each students homework and speeches individually. To ensure that students had sufficient background in the necessary social skills, they were instructed in the basic group process and discussed interactional problems with

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[6] A related consideration involved standardization of instructional methods across multi-section courses. Many communication studies programs typically offer multiple sections of introductory public speaking and staff those sections with a variety of instructors including part-time and adjunct faculty. Such a situation enhances that chance that a diverse range of instructional methods might be used across sections. Information gained about the appropriateness of instructional methods for this particular course, therefore, might be useful for programs which attempt to achieve some degree of uniformity or standardization across sections.

the instructor as they arose. Finally, to facilitate group processing, group members assessed the group process mid-way through the semester and made suggestions about ways to improve the process. In addition, intermittently throughout the semester, the instructor met with the group to discuss questions and concerns. Students were randomly assigned to groups.

Assessment Procedures

Students in four sections completed a survey questionnaire designed to elicit their assessment about the appropriateness of using cooperative learning groups as the instructional method for the course. Surveys were completed during the final week of the course. Students in two sections completed an open-ended question contained on a unit quiz which was designed to elicit perceptions about ways to enhance the group process.[7] A total of 49 useable surveys were collected (81.6% response rate) and 38 students completed the open-ended assessment question (100% response rate.[8]

The first research question, "Overall will students judge cooperative learning groups to be an effective method of instruction in a communication course with a significant oral performance component?," is answered by computing responses to the

[7] One of these sections is in progress at the time this paper is being written. Therefore students in that section have not yet completed the survey questionnaire which is administered at the conclusion of the semester.

[8] The number of useable questionnaires obtained in this study is affected by two factors: (1) one section which participated in the study contained only 6 students, and (2) some students in the other three sections did not complete the survey form or did not record their answers in a way that could be accurately recorded.

thirteen Likert-type questions on the survey. These questions are designed to elicit perceptions about the general effectiveness of cooperative learning groups (items 9, 10, 13), the nature of the interaction within groups (items 1, 2, 4, 11) and specific group outcomes one would expect to be associated with an appropriate learning process in a public speaking course (items 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12). Frequencies and means were computed for responses to these questions.

The second and third research questions, "What strengths will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a significant oral performance component to have?," and "What weaknesses will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a significant oral performance component to have?," are answered by student responses to two open-ended questions on the survey instrument (items 14 and 15 respectively). In addition student responses to the open-ended question contained on the mid-term quiz are used to identify strengths and weakness of the cooperative learning group process. Responses to the open-ended questions were coded for themes. Frequencies and percentages were computed for each coded theme.

Results

The first research question, "Overall will students judge cooperative learning groups to be an effective method of instruction in a communication course with a significant oral

performance component?," is answered affirmatively. Overall, the students judged the cooperative learning methods used to be effective. Three items on the survey were designed to elicit perceptions about the overall effectiveness of cooperative learning methods (items 9, 10, and 13). On item 9, 46 of 49 students agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to produce better speeches as a result of the group interaction. This response distribution accounted for 93.8% of all responses given and achieved a mean rating of 4.39 on a 5.0 scale. On item 10, 39 of 49 students agreed or strongly agreed that they earned a better grade on their speeches as a result of the group interaction. This response distribution accounted for 79.5% of all responses and achieved a mean rating of 4.16 on a 5.0 scale. Perhaps most indicative of the positive judgment about the perceived value of the cooperative learning process were the responses to item 13: "In my judgment, working in a group was a valuable way to develop my public speaking skills." On that item 48 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This response distribution accounted for 97.9% of all responses and achieved a mean rating of 4.69 on a 5.0 scale.

Students also judged the interaction within groups to be effective. Four items on the survey were designed to elicit perceptions about the nature of the interaction within groups (items 1, 2, 4, 11). Question 1 requires an overall assessment about the nature of the group interaction. Forty-seven of 49 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement,

"Working in groups in this class was an enjoyable experience." This response rate accounted for 95.8% of all responses given and a 4.69 mean rating on a 5.0 scale.

Students also judged the group process to be conducive to achieving positive learning outcomes. Six items on the survey (items 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12) addressed perceptions about learning outcomes associated with public speaking. Students judged the cooperative learning methods to be effective in generating feedback. Forty-three of 49 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (item 3), "During group sessions I received useful feedback about my speeches." This response distribution accounted for 87.7% of all responses and a mean rating of 4.45 on a 5.0 scale. Similarly, students judged the cooperative learning process to be an effective way to deal with anxiety. Forty of 49 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (item 5), "Presenting my speeches to my group helped me better cope with anxiety." This response distribution accounted for 81.6% of all responses given and achieved a mean rating of 4.32 on a 5.0 scale. Finally, students judged the cooperative learning process to be an effective way to learn how to construct and deliver a speech. Thirty-nine out of 49 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (item 7), "As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about how to construct and deliver a speech." This response distribution accounted for 79.5% of all responses given and achieved a mean rating of 4.22 on a 5.0 scale. Frequencies for all survey items are

reported in Table One, percentages are reported in Table Two, and means are reported in Table Three.

TABLE ONE: SURVEY RESPONSES REPORTED BY FREQUENCIES

Item	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Working in groups in this class was an enjoyable experience.	38	9	1	0	1
2. I was an active participant in my group.	32	14	1	2	0
3. During group sessions I received useful feedback about my speeches.	27	16	5	0	0
4. Members of my group seemed interested in my progress.	24	19	6	0	0
5. Presenting my speeches to my group helped me better cope with anxiety.	30	10	5	3	1
6. Members of my group provided specific suggestions I could incorporate into my speeches.	26	19	4	0	0
7. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about how to construct and deliver a speech.	21	18	10	0	0
8. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about problems a speaker may encounter in constructing and delivering a speech.	21	19	8	1	0
9. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I was able to develop better speeches.	21	25	2	0	0
10. My speech grade was better than if I had worked alone.	25	14	5	3	2
11. Rewarding the entire group for the success of individual members increased our efforts to help each other.	23	15	7	2	1
12. My communication skills improved during the group discussion and interaction.	29	17	3	0	0
13. In my judgment, working in a group was a valuable way to develop my public speaking skills.	35	13	1	0	0

TABLE TWO: SURVEY RESPONSES REPORTED BY PERCENTAGES

Item	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Working in groups in this class was an enjoyable experience.	77.5	18.3	2	0	2
2. I was an active participant in my group.	65.3	28.5	2	4	0
3. During group sessions I received useful feedback about my speeches.	55.1	32.6	10	0	0
4. Members of my group seemed interested in my progress.	48.9	38.7	12.2	0	0
5. Presenting my speeches to my group helped me better cope with anxiety.	61.2	20.4	10	6	2
6. Members of my group provided specific suggestions I could incorporate into my speeches.	53	38.7	8	0	0
7. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about how to construct and deliver a speech.	42.8	36.7	20.4	0	0
8. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about problems a speaker may encounter in constructing and delivering a speech.	42.8	38.7	16.3	2	0
9. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I was able to develop better speeches.	42.8	51	4	0	0
10. My speech grade was better than if I had worked alone.	51	28.5	10	6	4
11. Rewarding the entire group for the success of individual members increased our efforts to help each other.	46.9	30.6	14.2	4	2
12. My communication skills improved during the group discussion and interaction.	59.1	34.6	6	0	0
13. In my judgment, working in a group was a valuable way to develop my public speaking skills.	71.4	26.5	2	0	0

TABLE THREE: SURVEY RESPONSES REPORTED BY MEANS

Item	Mean
1. Working in groups in this class was an enjoyable experience.	4.69
2. I was an active participant in my group.	4.55
3. During group sessions I received useful feedback about my speeches.	4.45
4. Members of my group seemed interested in my progress.	4.36
5. Presenting my speeches to my group helped me better cope with anxiety.	4.32
6. Members of my group provided specific suggestions I could incorporate into my speeches.	4.44
7. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about how to construct and deliver a speech.	4.22
8. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I developed a better understanding about problems a speaker may encounter in constructing and delivering a speech.	4.22
9. As a result of group discussion and interaction, I was able to develop better speeches.	4.39
10. My speech grade was better than if I had worked alone.	4.16
11. Rewarding the entire group for the success of individual members increased our efforts to help each other.	4.20
12. My communication skills improved during the group discussion and interaction.	4.53
13. In my judgment, working in a group was a valuable way to develop my public speaking skills.	4.69

The second research question, "What strengths will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a

significant oral performance component to have?," was answered by student responses to an open-ended question (item 14) on the survey instrument. Responses to that question were consistent with the positive judgements about cooperative learning students expressed across the survey items previously reported. A total of 72 responses were coded within five content categories: Feedback, Interpersonal Development, Reduced Anxiety, More practice, and Improved Speeches. Twenty-three responses suggested that the cooperative learning process afforded either more or better feedback, 17 responses suggested that the cooperative learning process enhanced some aspect of interpersonal development among participants, 13 responses suggested that participating in cooperative learning groups helped reduce anxiety in some way, 11 responses suggested that students who participated in cooperative learning groups practiced their speeches more, and 8 responses suggested that students had better speeches as a result of participating in cooperative learning groups. These frequencies are reported in Table Four.

TABLE FOUR: CODED CATEGORIES OF MAJOR BENEFITS OF WORKING IN GROUPS REPORTED BY FREQUENCIES

Category	Frequency
Feedback	23
Interpersonal Development	17
Reduced Anxiety	13
More practice	11
Improved Speeches	8

The third research question, "What weaknesses will students judge cooperative learning groups in a communication course with a

significant oral performance component to have?," was answered by student responses to an open-ended question (item 15) on the survey instrument and by responses to an open-ended question on the mid-term examination. In question 15 on the survey instrument, students were asked to identify the major weaknesses of working in the cooperative learning groups. A total of 47 responses were given representing 8 different themes. Among these responses, the vast majority (26 responses) stated that there were no major limitations of working in cooperative learning groups. The most frequently cited limitation (9 responses) was that not all students in the group were adequately prepared for group meetings. The other limitations cited included: Not enough time to prepare (3 responses),Interaction with the same people (3 responses), Speech topics became boring (2 responses), Unclear about assignments (2 responses), Presentations were artificial (1 response), and Felt responsible for other people's performance (1 response). All response frequencies are reported in Table Five.

TABLE FIVE: CODED CATEGORIES OF MAJOR LIMITATIONS OF WORKING IN GROUPS REPORTED BY FREQUENCIES

Category	Frequency
No limitations cited	26
Not all members were prepared	9
Not enough time to prepare	3
Interaction with the same people	3
Speech topics became boring	2
Unclear about assignments	2
Presentations were artificial	1
Felt responsible for other people's performance	1

Similar results were found in student responses to the open-ended question on the mid-term examination. In that question, students were asked to explain how the cooperative learning process used by their group could be improved. A total of 81 responses were coded, representing a wide range of suggestions. The most frequent response given (20 responses), however was that the group process is going well. Other frequently given responses included: need more time to meet outside of class (11 responses), need more honest criticism within the group (10 responses), and need more structure of the group (9 responses). Collectively these four responses account for 50 of the 81 total responses given. The frequencies for all responses are reported in Table Six.

TABLE SIX: CODED CATEGORIES OF MID-TERM ASSESSMENT OF WORKING IN GROUPS REPORTED BY FREQUENCIES

Category	Frequency
Process is going well	20
Need more time to meet outside class	11
Need more honest criticism	10
Need more structure	9
Members need to be more prepared	6
Need better attendance	6
Not enough time to prepare	3
Interaction with the same people	3
Need more time to study for exams	2
Need more research time	2
Speech topics became boring	2
Unclear about assignments	2
Need a group leader	1
Need more teacher supervision	1
Need more encouragement	1
Presentations were artificial	1
Felt responsible for other people's performance	1

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide strong preliminary support for using cooperative learning groups in communication courses with a significant oral performance component. Cooperative learning groups have characteristics which inherently make them well-suited to enable instruction related for oral performance components, and particularly for public speeches. One of the keys to the quality of a speech is rehearsal. As Menzel and Carrell (1994) state "...oral rehearsal helps lead to success in the actual delivery of a speech." Rehearsal affords a speaker the opportunity to focus her ideas, enhance organizational clarity, identify problematic claims, pinpoint delivery problems, become familiar with visual aids which might be used in the speech, and assess more thoroughly how the target audience might respond to the speech. Although there is value derived from any rehersal, the advantages of rehearsal seem to be directly related to how realistic the rehearsal is; speakers who rehearse in realistic situations are likely to reap more direct benefits from their rehearsal (Hill and Ross, 1994). Students involved in well-structured cooperative learning groups are likely required to rehearse their speeches more frequently than they would in individualistic learning situations. Indeed, the students in this study indicated that they felt more prepared as a result of the required practice sessions structured into the cooperative learning group. Moreover, those rehearsal sessions more closely approximated the speaking situation because there was an audience, feedback during the presentation, and feedback

immediately after the presentation.[9]

Students in cooperative learning groups are also likely to get more feedback to assist them in speech preparation. In order to improve their public speaking skills, students must receive appropriate feedback both during the preparation and post-speech assessment phases. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith report that students give and receive more assistance in cooperative learning groups than they do in individualistic situation (31). The results of this study suggest that students were actively involved in providing feedback to members of their learning group and that overall the feedback received was judged to be valuable. Arguably, students in the cooperative learning groups in this study received more feedback than they would have in classes using individualistic learning approaches.

Cooperative learning groups also provide environments conducive to reducing anxiety.[10] Controlling anxiety is a significant instructional objective of a public speaking course. Survey research indicates that fear of public speaking is quite common among the general population of adolescents and adults (Motley 1988). College students in particular are frequently

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[9] Certainly there were fewer people in the audience than would normally be the case in a graded speaking situation. However, our point is that without the structured rehearsal in the cooperative learning group process, most students would practice their speeches less often and would likely practice them in the confines of their room or study area without <u>any</u> other persons present.

[10] Johnson, Johnson, and Smith write: "Cooperation typically produces less anxiety and stress and more effective coping strategies to deal with anxiety than does competition. Anxiety is one of the most pervasive barriers to productivity and positive interpersonal relationships, generally leading to an egocentric preoccupation with oneself, disruption of cognitive reasoning, and avoidance of the situation one fears. (1981, p.37)

apprehensive about speaking in the classroom (Bowers 1986). The results of this study suggest that students found the cooperative learning groups to be useful in helping them control their anxiety. One would expect such an outcome primarily because students in cooperative learning groups are forced to interact with others frequently, thus desensitizing the students to anxiety. In addition, students in cooperative learning groups have the opportunity to develop closer relationships with those in their group than they would normally do with students in a traditional, individualistically-oriented class.

Not only is this finding important in evaluating the appropriateness of cooperative learning processes for a public speaking class, it also has significant implications regarding student retention across the university. Chesebro et.al (1992) concluded that apprehension about speaking in dyads and groups are the two dimensions of communication apprehension most associated with at-risk students. Rosenfeld, Grant, and McCroskey (1995) generally confirmed Chesebro's analysis and suggest that instructional methodologies might target those specific aspects of apprehension with practice speaking in front of groups.

> If the speculation advanced by the present study and that of Chesebro et al. (1992) is theoretically justified, the students who are provided the systematic desensitization and skills training will (a) reduce their apprehension and raise their self-perceived competence, and (b) perform better, on average, in their school work. While it would be a sufficient humanistic outcome of the intervention to justify its use if only the first outcome were realized, confirmation of the hypothesized academic improvement would support our premise that communication skills and attitudes are central to student academic achievement. (p.84)

Cooperative learning groups, if properly structured, actively engage students in on-going communicative interactions. Thus, using cooperative learning groups in public speaking courses is one obvious way to increase opportunities for students to present formal speeches as well as practice critical interpersonal skills. Students engaged in such practice are likely to attain the systematic desensitization to which Rosenfeld, Grant, and McCroskey refer.

In addition, students in cooperative learning groups also have opportunities to enhance their self-esteem. Covington and Omelich indicate that by the time students reach college age, perceptions of self-worth rely heavily on perceptions of ability, and that mere perception of high ability is tantamount to a positive self-identity in school (1984). According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, students in cooperative learning situations "tend to interact, promote each other's success, form multidimensional and realistic impressions of each other's competencies, and provide accurate feedback. Such interaction tends to promote a basic self-acceptance of oneself as a competent person" (1991, p54). The results of this study support Johnson, Johnson, and Smith's conclusion because the students indicated that their competence as communicators generally and public speakers specifically improved as a result of interaction in the cooperative learning groups. Thus, cooperative learning groups seem to offer a fertile environment for students to develop enhanced perceptions of their capabilities as communicators.

Limitations and Suggestions

Because this study is a preliminary investigation into a relatively uninvestigated area, it is important to interpret the results within their proper perspective. The study uses the most basic level of assessment about cooperative learning processes--student perceptions. Student perceptions offer presumptively important information about the appropriateness of instructional methods but they are not the only indicators which might be used. To draw more definitive conclusions, additional research involving larger student samples, more sophisticated statistical procedures, and blind comparisons of the quality of finished speeches given by students in classes using cooperative versus individualistic learning methods will be necessary.

Although the results of this study indicate that cooperative learning groups can be an appropriate instructional method in communication courses with a significant oral performance component, instructors must make certain that the cooperative learning groups are properly structured. "Group work" is not necessarily synonymous with cooperative learning groups. Cooperative learning groups are formed around clearly defined principles and instructors must structure the group experience to include those principles. Moreover, students must be adequately prepared to work in cooperative learning groups. Instructors should not assume that students possess the necessary knowledge and skills to function productively in cooperative learning groups. Indeed, many of the frustrations students express in "group situations"

(e.g. conflict, lack of productivity, superficial effort and feedback) are indicative of inadequate student preparation regarding basic group processes, expectations, and interventions. Thus instructors--even those who very carefully structure the group process--must adequately prepare the students. Raffini summarizes the point eloquently.

> Although some students may intuitively know how to interact effectively with others, most need specific training in these skills. If teachers assume that students can work together without having been taught the requisite social group skills, positive achievements and interpersonal interactions will be unlikely....(1993, p.210)

Finally, we would caution instructors contemplating using cooperative learning groups to realistically assess the demands imposed by that instructional method. Structuring, implementing, and monitoring cooperative learning groups is an immensely time-consuming activity. We have found that we work harder as teachers when we use cooperative learning groups than when we use more traditional lecture/individualistic learning processes. In addition, instructors who use cooperative learning groups will regularly encounter logistical problems not normally associated with traditional individualistic methods. [11]

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[11] Examples of such problems include locating and scheduling meeting space for each group, coordinating group schedules for conferences, and counseling groups on interpersonal and task problems created by the multi-individual interactions inherent in the group process.

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